How to win friends and influence people

Catherine Osborne

Thales of Miletus

"It's too bad that most people have a phobia about water, as if getting wet was the end of the world. Well it is, but that's only because it's the beginning too. My advice is to make the most of water because it's the stuff of life: eight glasses a day is the recommended routine. Oh yes, and you may have heard of this new idea of having coins and things they call money so that you can store your wealth in a permanent and usable form. It's a great opportunity. I've discovered that if you establish a monopoly on some essential commodity, you can quickly make a great deal of that money stuff and put it aside for a rainy day. I recently did it with olives, but I expect you could apply the same principles in relation to, say, computer software or whatever it is your neighbours can't live without."

Protagoras of Abdera

"Now you're talking. How to win friends and influence people: that's exactly my philosophy, and I can see it's yours too. I'm glad we agree. The best thing to do is to sign up for some of my classes: as you can see they're extremely popular and its quite difficult to get a place, but I'm happy to take on anyone who shows promise and I can guarantee that after they've studied with me for a day they'll go home that much better. Indeed I'm so confident of giving satisfaction that I tell my students they need not pay the top-up fees unless they feel they're getting value for money. People are entitled to their own point of view: that goes without saying. But if your outlook on life is inhibited by outdated values that don't fit with today's expectations, that can leave you feeling bitter and dissatisfied. If you thought it was crass to sell double-glazing, well just learn to think positive. Double-glazing is wonderful: live for it! Then, once you can see things in that way your life as a double-glazing salesman will come to seem your ideal dream and you'll never envy another soul. That's how I look on my life as a Sophist, and I can't tell you how rosy it seems—I mean, is. You can't tell till you try!"

Socrates

"Win friends and influence people? Well yes, of course I spend my life trying to sort out people's mistakes and get them on the right track, so I suppose that is what I think is the most important thing—if, that is, by 'getting on in life' you mean doing what is most valuable for your soul? Don't you think that the best way to win a friend is to improve his virtue? Because if you leave him uncorrected his life will not be worth living and his death will not be worth dying. But I'm willing to have a discussion (if you've got a moment) about what a true friend is: I mean would you want to be friends with someone who couldn't tell right from wrong? Would such a person be friends with himself? Perhaps we need to get clearer on what we mean by 'self'? No, no, please do stay: I thought we were really getting on to something important here. Come back!'

Plato

"There is, of course, a conflict between the life of the ruler, even in the ideal state, and that of the individual as a lover of truth. In my view, anyone who is genuinely devoted to the welfare of the state will be reluctant to go in for politics, and hence your notion that winning friends and influencing people is part of how to get on in life seems to me wrong. It belongs to a notion of society, and of politics, that's not really the best. It assumes that what we want is influence over a society in which corrupt values are endemic. But that can never really be the best life. Rather the true ideal will be realised only once you have first made sure that society as a whole is imbued, from the top down, with values that are quite other-worldly. Politicians themselves will have to be men of high moral standards, not the weakest of humanity as they are now. And it must be their task to ensure everyone willingly pursues what is beautiful and good, not by compulsion or to pass exams, but out of knowledge (or a true belief) that that is the only thing worth having. In such a society it would be fine to 'get on in life' by becoming truly devoted to truth and goodness, and not by remaining devoted to the corrupt values of the present society. And if you are truly devoted to truth you won't willingly choose a life of power, but rather a life of pure intellectual enquiry, for as long as you can have that. I agree this may seem somewhat pie-in-the-sky, but surely none the worse for that? You asked me what I would say to the young, and if we don't start by getting the young to believe in beauty and goodness, where can we start?"

Aristotle

"I know you'll have had a lot of unrealistic nonsense from Plato with his imaginary world of so-called 'true goodness' that doesn't tie up with the ordinary sense of goodness we meet in this world. I've just about had enough of that. But let me tell you a thing or two about friends. There are three sorts of friends: (a) people who just want to borrow your homework; (b) people who fancy your body; and (c) real friends who actually care about you as a person. I've written a couple of books that go into detail on exactly what each of these categories involves, so I assume you know what I'm referring to. Now we don't need to go along with Plato's unrealistic notions about goodness to see that even in this life it makes sense to cultivate the real friends in category (c). After all, the other sorts of friends don't last (once the deadline for the homework is over or you've been injured in a car crash they won't love you any more). And who are those real friends? Well, they're the ones who like the best sides of your character, and encourage you to do well and not to get into bad habits. So they'll be decent people too, like you, and they'll like you because you're a decent person. So how do you get on in life? Well practise being a nice person, and as time goes on you'll become a nice person and have plenty of nice friends who help you to remain a nice person; and since everyone likes a nice person, and likes them for being who they are, what more could you want? I wish you all the best in your efforts."

Catherine Osborne teaches philosophy at the University of East Anglia. Her Very Short Introduction to Presocratic Philosophy *is due out in 2004.*

Vindolanda online

John Pearce

The wooden writing tablets, letters, accounts and reports, from the Roman fort at Vindolanda near Hadrian's Wall represent an almost unique find of a document type that must once have been common in the Roman empire. Through their contents, details of everyday life in a community on the edge of the Roman world can be reconstructed in a way not previously imagined. In a recent BBC TV programme the tablets were voted No. 1 of the 'Top Ten Treasures' from Britain in the British Museum because of their historical interest and importance.

A website launched on March 20th 2003 makes the Vindolanda tablets available online for the first time. It includes texts, translations and new high-resolution 'zoomable' digital images of all the published tablets. A virtual exhibition uses the texts and archaeological evidence from Vindolanda and other sites on Britain's northern frontier to introduce the content and context of the tablets. Interactive images allow users to explore the archaeological site and test their knowledge of the scripts. Other resources in the website include a reference guide to specialised terminology encountered in the documents (for example related to Roman currency and military ranks) and scholarly introductions to the tablets.

This freely accessible site will be of interest to anyone with an interest in the ancient world as well as to researchers, teachers and students in universities and schools. It is a collaborative project between the Centre for the Study of Ancient Documents (Faculty of Classics) and the Academic Computing Development Team at Oxford University, sponsored by the Andrew W. Mellon foundation.

John Pearce has just been appointed to a Lectureship at King's College London.